

Hooked on classical music from an early age, this month's reader has spent years building and honing a system with a single aim in mind: to bring the thrills of the concert hall and intimate sounds of the string quartet to his listening room. **Steve Harris** stops by for some unbeatable-sounding Bach

**I**n a spacious, high-ceilinged sitting room in a beautifully-proportioned Victorian house, Bach fills the air. We are listening to David's system, and feeling that this might be about as good as it gets.

'An electrician came in the other day,' says David. 'It turned out he sings in a heavy metal band. Anyway, he was doing something upstairs. I went up to give him tea, and he wasn't there. I thought he'd gone out for a cig or something. But he was just standing in here, and he said, "I've never heard anything like this!" I said, do you ever listen to baroque? And he said "No, never. But this is just amazing. I thought you had people down here!"'

Needless to say, David has made a long journey to arrive at this point. But he still remembers his first system with a lot of affection.

'That early 1970s student system took quite a bit of beating. It was a Trio amplifier, which cost about £80, Garrard SP25 turntable and little Wharfedale speakers. I put all that together and played the *Bridge Over Troubled Water* LP. And I couldn't get out of the flat! I just sat in front of it. It had a dramatic effect. Stereo, and the sense of space and liveliness. It was great.

'After that, I did every turntable that you did before you got to the daddy (the Linn!), which I didn't do. I had an Acoustic Research AR77, which was really good, then a Thorens. Then Rega brought one out and I had that.

'But I never got into high-end turntables. There was too much business in getting a stylus to drop, though it was great for the industry because there were so many peripherals and accessories. And I remember thinking, I'll go anywhere except vinyl. Even though I still miss that something you get from vinyl.'

So when CD came along you got a CD player immediately?

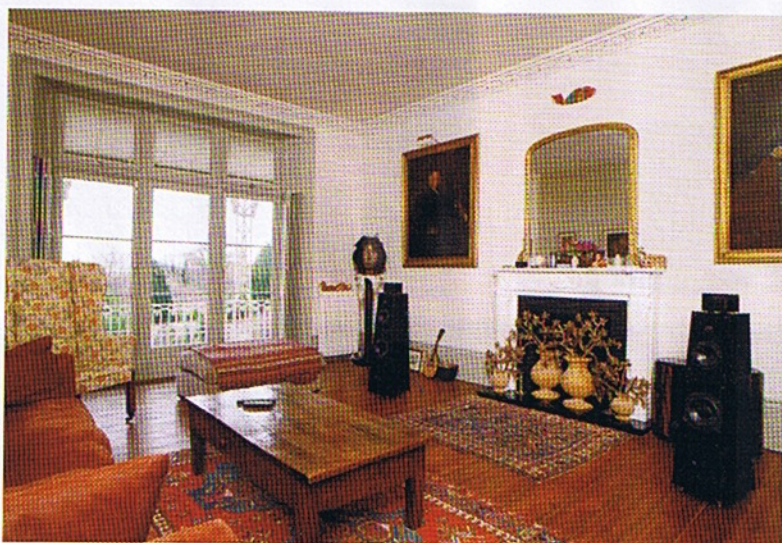
'Cassette came first! I would record from Radio 3 onto reel-to-reel and then onto cassette. So I went the whole distance, eventually, with a Nakamichi Dragon cassette deck.'

## SCHOOLED IN SOUND

This story starts even before David had that first system of his own.

'The person who introduced me to music at boarding school was my housemaster. Later, when he went over to Revox, he gave me his old Ferrograph reel-to-reel tape deck, with quite a large number of amazingly-recorded Verdi, Donizetti and Puccini operas.

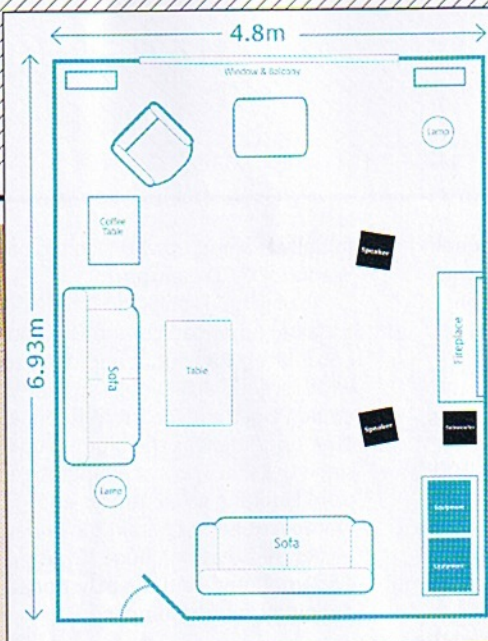
**RIGHT:** Verity Parsifal speakers are arranged to fire across the room, but still give a listening distance of nearly 4m. The speaker cables have been hidden beneath the floorboards



'With that Ferrograph and the recordings from it, and my housemaster having a very good system, I'd done a lot of my A-level revision in there, just playing music, because the rest of the place was very noisy. That changed my needs, frankly, from those of pop music, which I'd mostly been listening to before. Which was about bass and the experience of noise, really.

'And two years later, this extraordinary gift – he drove all the way down from Manchester and actually gave me the Ferrograph!

'Getting Tito Gobbi and Callas singing *Tosca*, having heard them live and suddenly realising that the system didn't do it, did make me want to get better systems. Particularly for a fuller sound from speakers. I went through quite a few speakers. I had Leak Sandwich



## MUSIC ROOM

Solid walls and generous dimensions, including an 11ft ceiling, make this the kind of room that gives any system a flying start. It's stylishly uncluttered, but with just the right amount of soft furnishing. The suspended wood floor, though, is perhaps the reason that David has found a benefit from those Vertex blocks on top of the speakers, and has also been led to experiment with slabs underneath them. But he's getting a fabulous sound on the baroque music he loves.



"Who wants to admit to their friends that they bought blocks of wood to put on top of their loudspeakers? But they made a difference"

600s at one stage. I had Quad electrostatics, which I'd got second- or third-hand from a music school. They were really old.

### RADIO DAYS

'It also made me get serious about tuners, getting proper aerials on the top of the house and so on. Because Radio 3, then, had some fair bandwidth. My brother was 25 years as a voice on Radio 3, so he would tell me when stuff was going out that was likely to be extraordinarily well sound-engineered.

'I was taking classical music a lot more seriously, going to a lot more

concerts. That ups your interest, I think, in having a delivery at home that is as authentic as you can afford. But yes, as soon as CD came out, I went that way pretty quickly.

'Then I got some speakers that were tiny, but with huge attitude, the Acoustic Energy AE1. They went "bang" at you, they would zip across the room. And I found that very exciting on strings, that speed. They could belt baroque music in a way that, wow! There was nothing between you and the instrument. It was in your face. It got a little too much in the end, but it was a terrifically exciting delivery.'

By now David was on the way to becoming a serial upgrader.

'It got beyond the point where you think, "I know this system, for x-amount of money, for me, makes a pretty good sound, that I really enjoy." Somebody brings out something with greater clarity, more space, and you're hooked again. If you can afford it, you keep going.'

By the late 1990s, David had ended up with a very serious system.

'Naim, its top-of-the-range CD player, and a great big amplifier from New Zealand that you could virtually fry eggs on, incredibly heavy with fins, and Shahinian speakers. It

### ABOVE:

At the heart of this system is a pair of massive Halcro DM58 amplifiers, placed unobtrusively in the far corner of the room, along with the DCS digital player system on Kinabalu equipment platforms from Vertex

was then in a very bright-sounding room, very long but very bouncy.'

But you liked the Shahinian omnidirectional effect?

'Yes, though perhaps I was told to! It wasn't difficult for the next move to outperform that by a very long way. When I met Jeremy of The Right Note in 2001, the improvement started to go exponential. And without wanting to butter up Jeremy, it was because of him saying, "Let's see how far you can go with digital!"

'I told him that I really liked the speed and excitement of the strings and violins, and the clean tone you get from, say, a real quartet in a relatively small space. And I know that sound, and I can't be conned, because I know it.

'And the first shock to me, honestly, was these speakers. I would have said, that's silly, there's no way Canada can make speakers.

But then if you'd said Australia for an amplifier, I would have said the same! I'd believed in Cambridge as the centre for almost all things good for quite a long time!

'But with the Verity Parsifal, actually the monitor part is an extraordinary speaker on its own. The midrange out-Englises anything Sendor or anyone else has done.'

## WIZARDS OF OZ

So those Verity loudspeakers replaced the Shahinians, and the Australian Halco amplifiers came in to drive them. And at the same time David bought himself the dCS Elgar digital-to-analogue converter,

initially teamed up with the big Wadia 270 CD transport.

'It may be a tank, and it may be a classic American component, but I absolutely loved it. It had different width steel on the edges so that you couldn't get a resonant frequency. That upgrade was the biggest uplift since the first Trio system had been, from listening to Dansettes and whatever else we had in those days.

'So that was one huge 'Oh-my-God' moment. And the other one, definitely, was upsampling.'

## AUDIO ILLUSION

That revelation came later the same year, with the arrival of the dCS Purcell. 'If I stick to my guns on what I hear, forget really what I think

is happening technically or scientifically, then there is a fuller, more musical experience in the result that comes out of

the speakers, with upsampling. That's unlike, I think, any other change that has occurred.

'It's the soundstage, really. It's the space, clarity between instruments and fullness of each individual note. It's the final con-trick, if you like, of the illusion of hi-fi, for me.

'If we were able to do an A-B and take it out, the sound becomes very much more focused in terms of soundstage, but there's far less fruit in the cake. There's far less richness to the music.'

Of course, the upgrading continued, with the addition of the dCS Verona master clock, and then the Verdi La Scala transport.

*'I know the sound of a real quartet in a small space, I can't be conned'*



**ABOVE:** David loves the Halcro amplifiers for their effortless delivery at all levels

**BELOW:** Digital front end is a dCS Paganini transport and fully-updated dCS Elgar DAC

'As far as the equipment and things like upsampling are concerned, I would find it very difficult now to do what on many occasions I've wanted to do, which is to make things simpler, more Zen if you like! I think once the upsampler book has been opened, to this particular child, it's a very difficult one to have taken away.

'One of the things about the Halcro amps as a step up from anything I've had before is that if you play, let's say, Bach concerti, at the levels my wife Annie listens to, although I would probably like a bit more volume, you really are still getting the full orchestral experience. I've been attributing that as much as anything to Halcro. And they have the wonderful thing of being a very strong person, who doesn't need to be. It's a very decent handshake from somebody who could easily kill you! There's a lot of power there.'

Adding a final touch to the low-end extension of the Verity speakers is an Audio Physic Minos subwoofer.

'The sub shouldn't really do anything for me, because I don't think I can hear quite a lot of the frequencies it delivers. But whenever



I try to do without it! There is a solidity to the platform from which the music appears to come, a solidity that the main speakers don't have on their own.'

## BITS 'N' BLOCKS

With electronics and speakers settled, further improvements came with the addition of various Vertex AQ accessories.

'I think the easiest thing to say about that is that I never intended to buy any of those bits. In fact, I have always been strongly against them. Because knowing a little a bit about the nature of the business, the high profit margins on accessories... my sense is, that's where all of the selling is going to come in. It's like when you get the new car, you're going to have endless reps trying to sell you insurance for the paintwork.

'So I was dead set against them, and actually, some of the products, which I'm sure Jeremy believes in entirely, I have not gone for. It's a decision based on one simple thing, which is did I hear anything different, which was better?'

However, the many Vertex AQ elements in the system now include mains filters and leads, Kinabalu equipment platforms, and, as a fairly recent addition, the Pico loudspeaker acoustic absorbers.

'Who wants to admit to their friends that they bought blocks of wood to put on top of their loudspeakers? It's clearly ridiculous! But they made a difference.

'The units connected with mains current undoubtedly made a difference, and the latest addition, the HiRez digital signal cable, made a lot of difference. If you could do a quick A-B, I think anybody off the

street would hear a difference. Annie is my test, because she doesn't know what's been done. With the platforms, Annie said that there was something cleaner and clearer and purer, without knowing we'd done anything.

'Even as I've got older and hearing goes, I'm incredibly critical of sounds. I'd stalk around this sound all the time, finding fault with the system.

'I had an uncle, a vicar, who was a serious musicologist – I once asked, could he help me with a basic history of music, and

got a 67-page handwritten reply, the whole history – he was an extraordinary man. Trains, cathedrals and music.

'He was a person who would listen, just listen, had no clue what any of the brand names meant, but he would just listen. And he would say, "Oh yes, this is a big sound." You'd ask what he meant and he'd say "It's bigger than the music!" He would tap the boxes and

*I'd prefer from here on, to hire musicians to perform live'*

**ABOVE:** Vertex AQ Mini Moncayo speaker links connect the Veritys' main monitor and bass sections

**BELOW LEFT:** dCS Verona Master Clock

**BELOW:** Audio Physic Minos sub reinforces the bass of the two-part Verity

say "That's not dead enough." Meantime he was filling huge Belfast sinks with concrete to put speaker drive units in. I could go there any time and find him either pottering about with some train he was trying to make, or upgrading his hi-fi.

'But he was someone who helped me hear the imperfections in each system. As much as anybody, I can blame him for the steady desire for upgrades, which typically was driving Annie mad. And yet she was listening to much more music than I was able to, because I was seldom there. To this day, as soon as you do some zapping and there's really nothing to watch, Annie will say, before me, "Let's turn that off and listen to music!"

'In a way she should be answering the questions, because although she's got no idea what all this cost – I hope! I think she'd be astonished – she does love listening to the music. One of the things that has pleased me is that she will read, and then stop. Because she's taken up by the music, and just can't go on reading. I think that's a terrific compliment to the system.

## THAT'S ENOUGH!

'There has been a recent upgrade to the system, a quite distinctive one, in terms of Paganini versus La Scala. But that's enough! When I come in and listen to music in the evenings, this is fine. And I haven't had that before really.

'In the past, there's always been something. I've thought, well I love the sharpness of this but I'm missing that, or it's slightly dead in the midrange.

'So now, from my point of view, this is it! I'd prefer from here on, to hire musicians to perform live in my living room!' ☺

